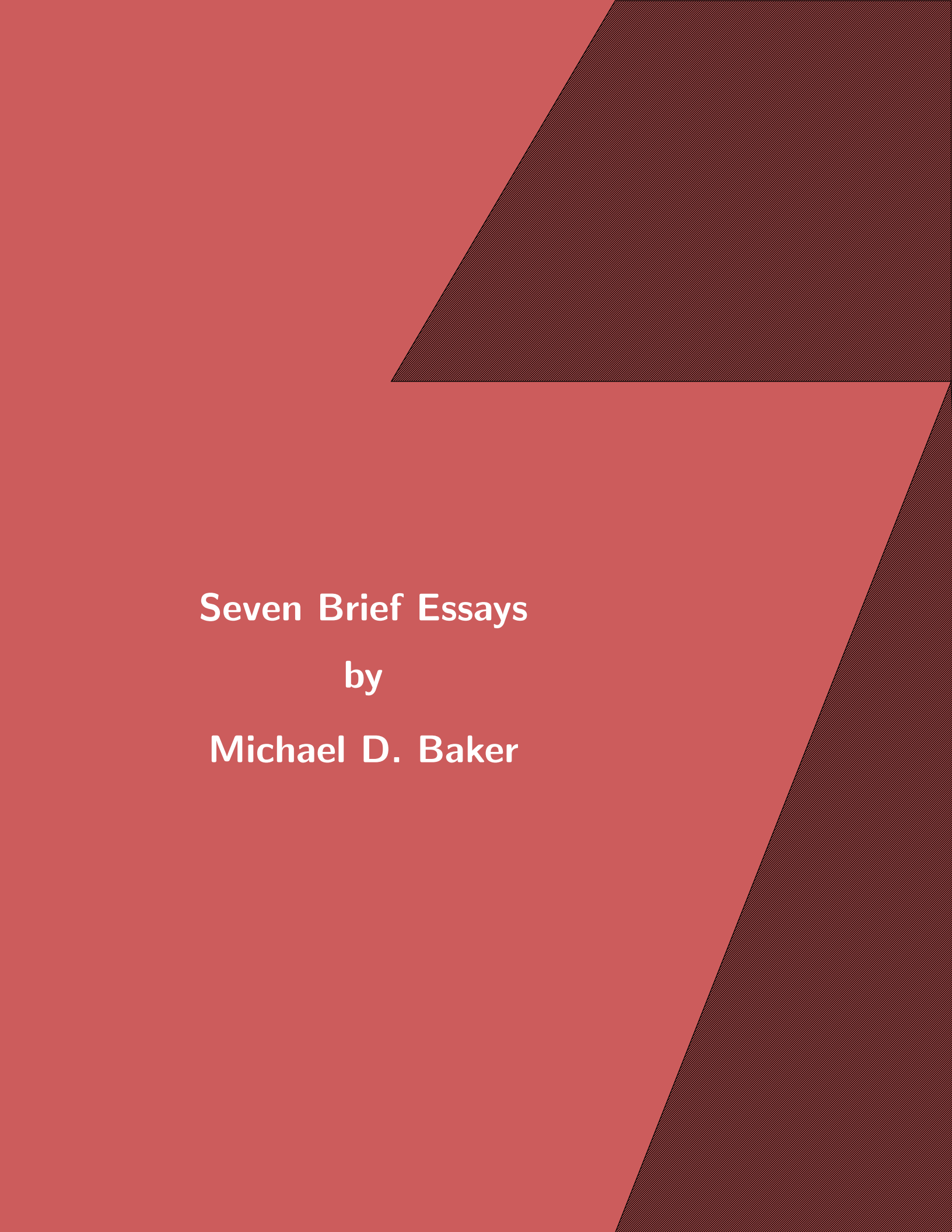




Seven Brief Essays

by

Michael D. Baker

SEVEN BRIEF ESSAYS

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Michael D. Baker

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1 On Love

for F.M.R.

I believe in love.

To many postmodern ears, the above statement likely sounds foolishly romantic, naïve, trite, corny, and not nearly ironic and cynical enough to be taken seriously.

Some folks likely could amuse themselves for hours, conjuring up, quite easily, words and phrases to marginalize a statement like “I believe in love” and, by doing so, make themselves feel smart and clever because they are far too seasoned and wise to fall for such foolish and romantic ideas.

Yet, if they were honest with themselves, we know they would depart from such colloquy wondering why it is they cannot believe in such ideas and why they are so afraid to believe in them, knowing that, deep inside, they do, in fact, long to believe in love. And this awareness would likely bestow upon them feelings of sadness, emptiness, resentment, and a longing for something to fill their seemingly abysmal void.

However, my above predictions are probably irrelevant with regard to this essay, as the kind of love typically ridiculed by the cynical is not the kind of love of which I speak. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stated in his “Beyond Vietnam” speech,

When I speak of love, I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I’m not speaking of that force which is just emotional bosh. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life.

While I am a secular person and not a believer in the “metaphysical,” I, like Dr. King, by love, mean neither sentimentality nor “emotional bosh.”

So what is it that I do mean by love? When I speak of love, I am speaking of a force, a force that manifests itself in acts of compassion for which there is no apparent justification or reward (i.e. people acting out of compassion for one another without any thought of being rewarded for such action). For I believe the manifestation of this force of love is what liberates us from the tit for tat economy of typical human interaction and shows us a superior way of being, a way of being that is not a Utopian “pipe dream,” but very real because it exists and operates within us already.

I believe many of us have experienced the force of this type of love within our lives at some point in time, this powerful force of giving to others while expecting nothing in return. And though this shared experience is valuable, my primary interest is in how we can expand the influence of this force in our lives and extend its influence to touch all areas of our lives and, by doing so, transform our society.

I believe the answer to this “how” lies within us, most notably in how we view the force of love and in how we view other people.

Too often, we view love as force in which we are passive. Something happens to us “magically” or “supernaturally” without us taking action or against our will; something invades us from the outside and transforms us. Frequently, we also view love as something we “fall into,” as if love is some sort of “accident.” And too often we view love as something reserved for “special” people in our lives who are “worthy” for some reason or another of this special consideration or treatment known as “love.”

However, the kind of love in which I believe is neither a force in which we are passive nor an accident nor reserved for a special class of people. The love in which I believe is a powerful force that we nurture, that we develop, that we exercise with intention, the intention being to transform ourselves, the lives of other people, and, consequently, our society as a whole.

The love in which I believe does not appear mysteriously out of nowhere, like some sort of unpetitioned, divine inspiration. The love in which I believe is like art in the sense that it originates with the creative force within us and evolves, as we do, over time as we transform ourselves into becoming more compassionate and enlightened human beings.

Of course, I don’t believe we will ever achieve a state of “perfect” compassion for other people, and such a state is not a state of love anyway. If we believe otherwise, then we are setting ourselves up for failure. Love is also not a state of perfect “peace” though we can certainly understand why this view of love has its allure. After all, wouldn’t it be wonderful if we

could somehow achieve a perfect state of “enlightenment” that enabled us to be effortlessly kind and compassionate to others? But such is not the case. Love is not easy. Love requires effort, hard work, strain, and toil. Love requires a lifelong inner conflict between our old selves and ideas and the newer, better, more compassionate and enlightened ideas of the person we are constantly trying to become. Love is a constant struggle in which we will fail many times. We simply have to come to terms with these failures and keep trying. This effort is itself a manifestation of love.

The love in which I believe is a difficult struggle, but this struggle is made easier when we transform the way in which we view other people. How can we transform the way in which we view other people? I believe the key to this transformation is learning to appreciate the uniqueness of the individual.

Yes, the above idea may sound corny. But when I speak of “appreciating the uniqueness” of the individual, I am not speaking of some insincere, trite platitude that “everyone is special.” By “appreciating the uniqueness” of the individual, I mean that we understand that, within all of us, there is something rare and valuable. That we understand that within all of us, there is something that has never existed before and will never exist again and that as a result, there is something in all of us that is unique to all time. If we need to be compelled to love other people, then this uniqueness, in and of itself, should motivate us to find every person “worth” loving. Loving things that are unique and special is natural for most of us; we simply need to understand that all people are unique and special.

And though we many love other people without the expectation of a reward, loving other people certainly has rewards for us. For example, when we love other people we also help ourselves because, when we love someone, we develop a special connection with that person that gives us more insight into that person’s uniqueness. From this insight, we are able to learn not only about that person but also about ourselves. For example, we can explore such questions are how are we different from this person? What positive characteristics does this person exhibit that I do not, and how can I develop these positive characteristics in my own life? The answers to such questions can help us discover each others’ uniquenesses as well as our own and ways of developing the expression of both.

As alluded to earlier, I believe the end goal of loving other people is to transform our society as a whole. Individually, loving other people will bring us personal happiness, regardless of the effort and pain often involved,

because we will feel better about ourselves for making the effort to love other people, and we will feel better for projecting the positive force of love, instead of negativity. Of course, socially, loving other people will bring happiness to others, as they will feel appreciated, cared for, and valued for just being who they are. Also, and perhaps more importantly, loving other people will motivate us to act in more positive and constructive ways when dealing with others, and this behavior will bring more happiness both to ourselves and to others and encourage others to engage in similar, more constructive behaviors.

I believe this constructive behavior brought on by love is the most important key to transforming our society as a whole and saving our society from the selfishness and violence that all too often characterize and plague it. Give the current state of affairs in the world, our very existence may depend on our ability to transform our society through love, and, loving one another, is a prerequisite to such a transformation.

We can have a better world, and we have a powerful force within us to bring about this better world. Not only is this force within us but this force is also active within us. The force is called love, and it is our tool for building “the new world within the shell of the old.” All we must do is learn how to use it.

2 On Childhood

for F.M.R.

What happens to us as we older?

Well, obviously, a number of things happen to us as we grow older—some good, some bad, and some that just are. But the “happening” or change, for lack of a better word, in which I’m interested, is how it is that we lose the values we had as children.

Think about the values we learned as children—don’t hit your neighbors, share with others, clean up after yourself, don’t take things that don’t belong to you without permission....How is it that “along the way” we lose these basic values for the sake of maturity?

How is it that we learned that it’s OK to hit your neighbors, at least “under certain circumstances”? Or that it’s OK not to share with other people because competition is somehow virtuous because it’s the “American way”? Or that it’s OK not to clean up after yourself because it’s too expensive or inconvenient or the magic of *lassie faire* economics will somehow “clean up” after us? Or that it’s OK to take from other people, as long as we have some sort of rationalization for doing so?

Look at the values we had, the values we were taught as children, and look at values that have been ingrained in the majority of us as adults. Then ask yourself, how is it that we became so perverted? What happened to us? And how did it happen? How is it that we expect more of children than we expect of ourselves? And how is this not a sad commentary on all of us and a sign of one of our greatest failures?

Of course, when I say that we “hit” our neighbors as adults, I am speaking somewhat metaphorically. Most of us don’t literally “hit” our neighbors, at least not usually.

But, unfortunately, we do far worse things than hit our neighbors. We

drop bombs on our neighbors. We torture and abuse our neighbors. We cage our neighbors in prisons like animals and execute them. Yet, as children, we knew these things were wrong.

As children, we knew it was wrong not to share our toys with others. Yet, as adults, we have yet to recognize that sharing far more critical things such as food, housing, and health care has any value at all. Or even sharing something as simple and “free” as love.

As children, we knew if we spilled our milk that it was wrong not to clean it up. Yet, as adults, we don’t think it’s important to clean up after ourselves when we spill toxic waste into the environment, endangering the lives of human beings and other living things, or that we should even do something as simple as make the effort to recycle the trash we generate daily.

As children, we knew it was wrong to take things from other people without their permission. Yet, as adults, we think it is acceptable to take entire countries away from their inhabitants.

So how is it that we arrived at this terrible transformation for the worse? For most of us, the transformation likely didn’t occur out of nowhere all at once. More than likely, the transformation occurred slowly over time, as a series of small compromises, little lessons we learned that taught us that our childhood values didn’t work in the “real world” and that we had to give them up in order to survive.

I apologize if I sound as if I’m promoting some Wordsworthian idealization of childhood; that is not my intent. I do not believe that children are naturally “innocent” or “virtuous,” whatever those things mean. I am not trying to suggest anything at all about the innate nature of children themselves. What I am interested in are the basic values that parents teach their children, and these positive basic values come from adults, not children.

So why do parents teach their children these values? Why would parents teach their children something that they, more than likely, believe will inevitably become corrupted and in which they, on some level, at least allegedly, no longer believe themselves. Are parents trying to give their children a delusional, positive, romantic view of the world, so long as the corrupt world will allow?

Though I’m sure many parents would like their children to have positive world views, I don’t believe that this is the primary motive for parents teaching their children these values. I believe that parents teach their children these values because they believe these values to have real-world utility

and purpose. The evidence for this utility and purpose is obvious—look at the world we live in, and look at the world we could live in if everyone followed the values commonly taught to children.

Fortunately, we don't have to become children again to employ the values. Remember: these values come from the adults who teach them to children. We simply need to realize that if these values are worth instilling in children, then they are worth retaining and employing ourselves as adults.

Undoing many of the compromises we made along the way will not be easy, but we can succeed, if we are willing to try. However, we'll need to be willing to accept the hurt and pain that come from making ourselves vulnerable—like children. We may choose not to “hit” other people but be “hit” in return. We may choose to share with others only to be stolen from or, at least, to have the kindness not returned. But, in general, these things will likely not occur, and people will respond positively to our “childish” values, and, as a result, our lights will shine a positive and transforming force upon the world. And, like resilient children, we will survive the times we are hurt.

So let us all become as children again, for we all deserve better than the compromised values of grown ups.

3 On Music as Intellectual Property

for musicians, music patrons, and Richard Stallman

To paraphrase and adapt the words of Richard Stallman, if I believe I have a beautiful and/or interesting musical idea, I feel a compelling need, if not an almost ethical obligation, to share this idea with others, particularly with those who I believe will gain pleasure from the knowledge of or exposure to my idea. Likewise, I hope the feeling of this “compelling need” is reciprocal, that others who believe they have beautiful and/or interesting musical ideas will share them with me. I am certain that most of us who are musicians and music lovers share the desire for this exchange of musical ideas. Perhaps this feeling, this creative, expressive drive is the force that unites us most as a community.

But, personally, my “compelling need” goes beyond simply the sharing of ideas with others: I also feel the need to permit, if not to encourage, others to build upon my ideas and/or to adapt my ideas for their own purposes, if they deem my ideas so worthy. And, yes, by this I do mean that I not only permit and but also encourage others to perform my works and to modify my works in any way(s) they deem appropriate and necessary for their own purposes.

No doubt, my greater “compelling need” will give some readers pause. But should it?

Musicians have always been inspired by one another’s work. In fact, the processes of inspiration, emulation, derivation, etc. are so necessary to music that music would cease to develop and to exist without them. Furthermore, music would never have come into existence at all without referencing something. Hence, music is by its very nature derivative, and, if

we ignore this fact—that the very essence of music is the process of evolution, copying, and adaptation—our premeditated ignorance or our wishful thinking about our own originality will not make this fact not a fact.

Some readers will suggest that a composer who states, “This song by so-and-so inspired me to write this new song” and a composer who states, “I took so-and-so’s song, changed it a little bit, and created this new song” are expressing two entirely different ideas or phenomena. But are these composers’ statements substantially different? These statements, at best, seem to express two different points on a spectrum of “originality” or “derivation,” if we can believe that being “inspired by” and song is somehow less derivative than “adapting” or “remaking” a song, etc., and the validity of this belief seems rather questionable.

How useful are distinctions between degrees of derivation and originality to us, the musicians and music lovers, anyway, if, in fact, these degrees can even be determined? If we ponder their usefulness for even just a little while, we quickly see that the distinctions don’t seem useful at all. In fact, these distinctions only seem to drive a wedge between us, a wedge that keeps us working in isolation, rather than in cooperation, denying us the opportunity to exchange and develop ideas democratically and transparently and to further the state of the art, a wedge that denies the inevitably dialectical nature of music, and, as a result, chokes what music is at its very core.

So how have we come so far down a road that is so obviously wrong and so contradictory to the very nature of the art we love? And whose interest(s) have this road actually served? As far as I can tell, not the mass of musicians and music lovers.

Has the wedge separating us become a religion? Is “originality” be our Spenta Mainyu and “derivation” our Angra Mainyu? Is the struggle between these two fabrications what keeps us in perpetual conflict and competitiveness, rather than in constructive cooperation and collaboration? Has this cliché duality distracted us from our “ultimate reality”—music itself.

At the very least, metaphysical considerations do seem to be at play here. Let’s look again at the two earlier statements by our hypothetical composers:

- “This song by so-and-so inspired me to write this new song.”
- “I took so-and-so’s song, changed it a little bit, and created this new song.”

No one finds fault with the first statement, and the common view is that the second statement alludes to a composing process that is more “derivative” than the first.

But notice what else is different between these two statements: The first is passive, and the second is active. In the first statement, the composer is acted upon by music. In the second statement, the composer acts upon music. Why is it that the former is commonly considered more acceptable than the latter? Why should the composer wait to be acted upon? Why should he or she wait passively to be “inspired,” instead of taking action to engage in the creative act himself or herself? Are we still so superstitious as to believe in muses? So it seems.

Or is the issue proprietorial? Is the offense that, in the first statement, someone else’s music acts upon the composer and, in the second statement, the composer acts upon someone else’s music?

But since we know that music is by its very nature created by emulation, derivation, etc., we also know that “someone else’s music” is hardly only that some one’s music. Music’s collective and dialectical nature confounds normative conceptions of individual proprietorship.

And what of the music lovers who are patrons but who don’t participate in the creative, composing process? What about the exchanging and sharing of music in which these individuals engage? The fact is, these patrons are engaging in the creative, composing process, as much so as any of us who consider ourselves musicians and/or composers. Furthermore, these patrons are the primary means by which the “compelling need” of those of us who consider ourselves to be musicians and/or composers to share is satisfied. The fact is, we are all one community, and those who attempt to drive a wedge between us, fellow musicians, composers, and patrons, are not doing so to serve our interests or the interests of music, but their own interests.

The problem isn’t that musicians and music lovers share ideas and want to continue to share ideas. The problem is that the corporate, capitalist model of the creation and distribution of music is at odds with the very nature of music itself. Could this at least be part of the reason why so much of the music generated by this model is of such poor quality?

However, we can liberate ourselves from this model. We can do better. We are a creative community, and, as a result, we can find creative ways to make, distribute, and enjoy music that are healthy for our community and the art form we love. By throwing off the corporate, capitalist model of creation and distribution, the only thing we have to lose is baseless,

senseless conflict and competition and the shackles of a decaying, dated industry that retards creativity because it is at odds with the very nature of the art it supposedly supports.

What we have to gain is the world.

4 On Curiosity

Why is it that curiosity is not more encouraged or rewarded in our society?

Even as children, many of us were discouraged from being curious or, at least, too curious. If we asked too many questions, we were made to know (sometimes less subtly than other times) that we were being a nuisance, or we were given some nonsensical answer to stifle our inquiry. We were also taught expressions that demeaned curiosity, like “curiosity killed the cat,” and we read stories about the misadventures of curious characters that reinforced the dangers of curiosity.

So why is it that our natural curiosity as children was not more encouraged or looked upon more favorably by adults? I suspect that the answer is “fear.” But why would adults “fear” the curiosity of children? Certainly in some (or, perhaps, in many) cases this fear stemmed from a legitimate, adult concern for our welfare—for example, adults trying to keep us from exploring things that could lead to bodily injury. However, in other cases, legitimate adult concern is probably less of a factor. For example, when we asked questions about the sexual organs of the opposite sex, many of us were either made to know that such questions were inappropriate, or we were given nonsensical answers that even our immature minds knew were ridiculous. Such adult responses had nothing to do with concern for such things as our safety. In fact, such adult responses actually were quite reckless, as they ran the risk of teaching us things like curiosity is “bad,” at least in some instances, that lying is an “appropriate” response to certain seemingly natural questions, and that certain normal, natural phenomenon cannot be discussed in an open and intelligent manner.

So why do otherwise seemingly rational adults fear curiosity in children, at least, with regard to certain issues? I would venture to guess that they fear curiosity because they see it as a threat. But a threat to what? I propose a threat to such things as certain long-held beliefs and taboos. For

example, in a certain type of religious household, an adult might teach a child that “God made the world.” In response to this statement, a child might ask the question, “who made God?”—a perfectly logical and reasonable question that one should expect from any thoughtful being—and the adult response would all too often be to stifle this line of inquiry. Of course, “the problem” isn’t with the child’s question but with the fact that the adult doesn’t have a sound answer to the question and, thus, in order not to challenge certain long-held beliefs, teaches the child that certain “statements of fact” should not be questioned, no matter how illogical or unreasonable they may seem.

If my proposition is correct, that curiosity is not more encouraged or rewarded in our society due to fear, this is very unfortunate. In general, fear is a very destructive emotion, and its destructive effects are particularly evident in the effect it has on learning. Fear stifles curiosity, and curiosity is a precursor to an interest in learning. Thus, fear impedes learning and deprives us of the benefits that stem from learning and knowledge.

As a result, I propose that if we can eliminate our fear of challenging long-held beliefs and taboos, then we can better encourage curiosity and, hence, increase learning and knowledge and the benefits that we can receive from learning and knowledge.

Of course, the pattern of fear impeding learning and knowledge is not limited to childhood, first and foremost, because the taboo on questioning certain long-held beliefs and taboos often has been so internalized by adulthood that few adults consider questioning many long-held beliefs and taboos, no matter how absurd they may seem (or once may have seemed).

So how can we go about breaking this pattern of fear impeding learning and knowledge? Let’s begin by reviewing the pattern once again:

- Fear impedes curiosity.
- Curiosity is a precursor to learning and, as a result, knowledge.

Given the above pattern, as far as I can tell, there are two paths we must venture on to redeem and encourage curiosity—one path for encouraging curiosity in adults and one path for encouraging curiosity in children.

Encouraging curiosity in children will be much easier than encouraging curiosity in adults. Children are naturally curious, whereas adults have all too often had their natural impulse to curiosity stifled by the prohibition on questioning long-held beliefs and taboos.

Since children are naturally curious, to engage and promote curiosity in children, all we have to do is make sure that we don't discourage curiosity by enforcing or reinforcing non-constructive beliefs and taboos. Of course, this is easier said than done. And, of course, there will likely be societal repercussions for allowing such free thinking in children and not enforcing and reinforcing long-held beliefs and taboos.

With regard to adults, nurturing curiosity in children is certainly important for developing curiosity in adults, as children nurtured in an environment in which it is safe to be curious will more than likely grow up to be adults confident in their ability to think freely, question, and explore. However, developing curiosity in adults, beginning in adulthood, is obviously a long-term project. Encouraging people who are adults today to be curious will obviously be difficult and will certainly involve creating a safe, nurturing environment in which adults, who've been taught over and over again that certain things should not be questioned or challenged, feel safe to question and challenge. Since such a safe, nurturing environment likely will not spontaneously emerge in society at large, we will have to create such an environment, early on anyway, in small groups since this will be manageable. Perhaps, such a movement will even have to begin one on one with each of us, individually, taking a risk and making an effort to encourage the curiosity of those we come in contact with in our day-to-day lives by making sure that those around us understand that we are open to discussing "unconventional" ideas. While this may not seem like an auspicious step, we must begin somewhere, and a couple or a few people taking the dangerous first step of making themselves vulnerable by communicating and questioning openly is a good start to a better, more positive future for us all.

5 On Social Justice

Since time immemorial, humans dreamed of flying. These dreams of flight often manifested themselves in myths and efforts of humans trying to fly by means of artificial wings because the obvious example of how to fly came from flying creatures like birds. Such examples are what humans knew of flight, so, if humans were to fly, it was assumed they would have to imitate creatures like birds.

Of course, human efforts to fly as birds do always failed. It was only when humans came to understand the principles of flight that humans finally succeeded in flying.

This history should be a lesson to us. We could not achieve flight by imitating a bird. Our liberation only came in the discovery and mastery of the principles of flight. In other words, creation from principles, not from imitation of appearances, was the key to our success.

The same is true in our desire for social and economic justice. We cannot achieve social justice by imitation, whether that imitation be of the ideas or of societies of the past or present.

We must endeavor to discover what the underlying principles of a just society *are* within our cultural and temporal context.

We must also keep in mind that social justice (or perhaps our quest for it) is a concept that is not static, but evolves and changes over time, adjusting to changing cultural and temporal conditions. What we define as the principles of social and economic justice today will not necessarily be the principles of the same tomorrow. These changes should be welcomed; we just must adapt and endeavor to work within the current cultural context.

All this is not to say that we cannot learn from or draw from the past, of course. Influence from the past is inevitable, as we are a product of historical influences. Neither is this to say that by endeavoring to understand principles that we are endeavoring to find some empirical model of

achieving social and economic justice. Empiricism is extremely valuable in the appropriate context. However, “social and economic justice” is likely not the proper context, as the concept of social and economic justice is a human ideal with little (or perhaps no) empirical basis (i.e. we strive for justice because we believe it is important out of a sense of fairness and love for others, not because there is necessarily any “scientific” reason or foundation for it).

And in our search for the “underlying principles” of social and economic justice, let us not turn the quest for these principles into a scholarly endeavor, particularly at the expense of action. We have more than a sufficient number of people willing to theorize, discuss, and pontificate about injustice as an abstract idea and within the protective bubble of inaction and intellectual isolation. Our quest for the principles should be an active one, one that involves active engagement in our communities, one that involves discerning the answers through the most powerful oracle of all—love.

6 On Prisoners

One of the most pathetic and tragic institutions of our society is our prison system. Yet, in spite of the system's complete and utter incompetence in addressing society's ills and the system's obvious aggravation of society's ills, the system continues to grow at an alarming rate.

One could cite various reasons why our prison system has grown at such an alarming rate, but the root cause of most of these reasons is that the prison industrial complex fuels the capitalist economy—prisons provide cheap and even free labor pool, provide desperately needed jobs in economically depressed areas, and so forth.

But why have we, as a society, allowed the prison system to play this economic role and to grow to the extent that it has? No doubt, one major reason is our society's view of prisoners themselves.

I don't wish to romanticize prisoners or to pretend that all prisoners are only victims of social injustices. At the same time, as someone who has worked in prison outreach, I know, first hand, that most prisoners are not what the majority of people think.

So what do people think of when they think of prisoners? As a society, we are conditioned to be afraid of prisoners. Prisoners, we are told, are criminals. And, on some superficial, circular-reasoning level, this claim seems to make sense. Prisoners are in prison, and prison is for criminals (or so we are told anyway). And since criminals do things like steal from people and physically hurt people, it only makes sense to be afraid of such people?

However, the reality of the kind of people that prisoners are is much different. The reality is, is that much of the crime for which we imprison human beings is circumstantial and even victimless. And, as a result, the majority of people who are in prison don't belong there or, at least, didn't until they were introduced into our "correctional" system.

One of the biggest fillers of our prison system is our “war on drugs.” An entire book could be written about the folly of the drug war, but, here, it will suffice to say that while this “war” has been completely ineffective in stopping the sale and use of illegal drugs, it has been remarkably effective in fueling the prison industrial complex, and, as a result, the latter can be the only rational, albeit deplorable, reason for continuing the “war.” Conveniently, the drug war not only keeps the prisons filled to maximum capacity and beyond, but it also keeps the prisons filled with those individuals enfranchised society, by and large, cares about the least.

If the drug war were truly about helping people and making society safer, we would be giving people with drug addictions treatment, not prison sentences, and we would be trying to help those people selling drugs find a more constructive ways of earning a living. And if we were truly serious about stopping the supply of illegal drugs, we would be targeting those at the top of the supply chain, not the small-time dealers that fill our prisons.

Of course, all this discussion about the “drug war” begs the question of whether prohibition is a desirable policy in the first place. Prohibition certainly has been ineffective; that’s not even a serious question. With regard to the nature of illegal drugs themselves, a great deal of misinformation has been given to the public about actual effects of various illegal drugs, and this misinformation has contributed to public support of the “drug war.” Setting the record straight on the true dangers or lack thereof of various illegal substances is well beyond the scope of this essay, so it will have to suffice to say that various commonly use illegal substances are not as dangerous, in and of themselves, as many people are led to believe. That being said, it is, nevertheless, very sad to see someone addicted to any substance, legal or illegal, if that substance controls her or his life in an detrimental way because that addiction is, then, stunting that person’s development and potential. Of course, again, the solution to helping a person suffering with such an addiction is treatment, not prison.

But our prisons are not just filled with victims of the “drug war.” Our prisons are also filled with individuals who have committed no crimes at all, or at least none for which they are incarcerated. While much of larger society is unaware of the extent that such erroneous incarcerations exist, larger society also tends to be uninterested in or doesn’t believe the plight of these individuals because the individuals seem to “fit the bill” of someone who would engage in the kind of acts for which they are incarcerated and because larger society possesses a sort of reactionary, pre-meditated igno-

rance that, by and large, “our justice system works” and that erroneous convictions are simply not possible or are, at least, extremely rare.

Of course, there are individuals in prison who are incarcerated for acts they did commit. But the question in these cases is whether prison is an appropriate or effective way of addressing whatever the socially unacceptable behavior is for which they are incarcerated. And the answer to this question, based on a preponderance of the evidence, is a resounding, no, prison is not an effective way of dealing with the behavior. In fact, all the evidence suggests that prison is extremely detrimental to those who are incarcerated due to the prison culture and lifestyle, the lost time off one’s life, the stigma of having been incarcerated once one is released, and so forth. This overwhelming lack of effectiveness is attested to by recidivism rates even though recidivism rates are typically cited as “evidence” that the prisoners in question are truly just innately bad people or that they actually enjoy being in prison because they’re lazy and want the “free room and board” prison supposedly provides or other such nonsense.

For example, let’s look at violent crime. Certainly, we would all agree that, in general, violent behavior is socially unacceptable. But even violent behavior isn’t appropriately or effectively addressed by prison. Let’s take a woman who kills her newborn child because she’s depressed after giving birth. What constructive purpose could prison possibly serve in this situation? The woman is already depressed, and she has killed her child, a nightmarish act that she most certainly regrets and about which she is extremely distressed. How can subjecting her to the torture and stigma of prison help her or society? Similar could be said about a woman who kills a man due to an abusive relationship. The fact is, most violent crime is circumstantial like this, and the individuals involved in such acts pose no threat to society at large. Certainly, such violence is very sad and unfortunate, but prison can do nothing to remedy the situation, either for the individuals involved or for society at large. In fact, prison only make the problems worse. What these people need is help and compassion, not prison.

Of course, there are a small number of individuals who we might have no choice but to physically confine, people like serial killers and serial rapists, because we don’t know why these people do these horrible things, and we don’t know how to help them. But these individuals make up a very small portion of the prison population.

Prisoners are human beings. And, by and large, the circumstances that

landed them in prison were not entirely, if at all, of their own making. And even when prisoners are guilty of engaging in behavior that society cannot tolerate for legitimate reasons (like public health and safety), prison is, in almost all cases, not an appropriate or effective way of the addressing whatever the social transgression is. What most prisoners need is an alternative to the circumstances that led to their incarceration—compassion, education, job training, psychological therapy, drug treatment, and so forth. What they need is love.

7 On Why We Fight

Approximately, 15 to 18 billion years ago, to the best of our knowledge, the universe began.

This event that sparked into existence everything was a cataclysmic one that still confounds our imaginations and even our best science. One million years after this beginning, atoms formed. One billion years later, proto-galaxies formed. After 5 billion years, primeval galaxies and quasars formed. And after 8 to 20 billion years, today's galaxies formed.

Within one of these relatively unnoteworthy galaxies, around 5 billion years ago, the matter that would eventually become our solar system formed an immense cloud of dust rotating in slowly in space. From this dust, a protosun formed that would eventually become our "Sun," and, from the remaining matter surrounding this protosun, the planets formed, including our own, "Earth."

On this one planet, Earth, conditions were just so right as to allow not only life to form but also complex life, the only planet in the entire universe, insofar as we know, on which this phenomenon has ever occurred.

One would hope that with such a unique opportunity that we would make the most of it. Out of the entire vast expanse of the universe and in all of time, we are *it*. As a result, for example, we could spend our days reflecting on our existence and the existence of the universe around us since, insofar as we know, we are the only beings capable of such an undertaking. Or, perhaps, we could spend our days caring for, helping, and nurturing one other since we are, insofar as we know, all alone in the universe. But, unfortunately, for the most part, this is not how we have spent our days.

Certainly, throughout human history, there have been individuals who had sought to encourage or to act out on their own accord the best that human beings can be. But, in spite of these remarkable individuals, human history has been dominated by individuals and groups of individuals who

have sought to stifle those who seek to express the best of human aspirations in order to secure power and wealth for themselves. These repressive individuals have used various tools at their disposal to do so—patriotism, nationalism, racism, sexism, superstition, and so forth.

In our current day and age, these individuals, whether they come in the form of politicians, corporate organizations, or in some other form, have managed to transform our unique and amazing experience of being alive into a drudgery of rent and mortgages; unfulfilling, mindless jobs; sprawling suburban strip malls; pollution; prisons; and wars instead of an existence of nurturing and wonder.

And the irony of all ironies is that these same individuals who have so mismanaged our collective lives and our world are the same ones who tell us that if just vote for the right person the next election cycle or that if we buy the next new, over-hyped product that we don't need, that everything will be OK—that we will be OK.

However, the obvious problem is that the same people who promise us solutions are the same people who are the problem to begin with.

The fact is that we don't need these foolish people, especially given their deplorable track record of carelessness and selfishness. What we need is a new world, one becoming us, one worthy of us given our special place in the universe, one that should come naturally to us if we all just recognize our unique place in the universe and how special each of us is accordingly.

And it is for this better world that we fight, so that all of us, together, might become what we are.

As a result of our position in the universe, what is surprising is not that we are willing pledge our own security and even our lives to bring about social and economic justice and to stop senseless wars, but that those who oppose us would oppose us at all. After all, we are fighting for them too. For they, too, are part of this amazing phenomenon called "life," and their existence, too, is being retarded by the drudgery demanded by the powers-that-be for the powers-that-be—even if they are part of the powers-that-be.

It is for this reason that love and enlightenment, as always, are the most powerful tools in our fight for the better world. Our fight is not primarily a physical one, like that of those who oppose us, but one that involves such things as teaching those who oppose us to love themselves, to see how special, unique, and valuable they are as individuals, and to see, accordingly, how valuable each one of us is, and to transform themselves and join us in transforming the world as we grow together in the process of

building “the new world in the shell of the old,” one worthy of who are as individuals, and one that will be worthy of us as we become what we are.

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